

Lewis Baltz

Maryland

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The Nation's Capital in Photographs, 1976

Lewis Baltz

The Corcoran Gallery of Art
Washington, D.C.

June 19-September 12, 1976

The Nation's Capital in Photographs, 1976 is an unprecedented Bicentennial project originated by The Corcoran Gallery of Art. Eight eminent American photographers have been invited to spend extended periods—at least a month—in Washington, D.C. during 1975-76 to photograph the city, its environs and people, as each was guided by his own vision. Thus we hoped to achieve a diversified documentation of a place and time. A selection of four prints by each artist is to be earmarked for exhibition at the Corcoran in the Tricentennial year 2076.

The participating artists, each shown separately, two at a time in four stages throughout the year 1976, are LEWIS BALTZ, San Francisco; JOE CAMERON, Washington, D.C.; ROBERT CUMMING, Los Angeles; ROY DeCARAVA, New York City; LEE FRIEDLANDER, New City, New York; JOHN GOSSAGE, Washington, D.C.; JAN GROOVER, New York City; and ANTHONY HERNANDEZ, Los Angeles.

The artists were selected by Chief Curator Jane Livingston and Assistant Curator Frances Fralin. As organizers of this series of exhibitions they have been responsible for the complete task of scheduling and working with the artists at every stage of the project's long development, and for producing the eight catalogues. I wish to express my special appreciation to them and to each of the eight artists for their unstinting cooperation.

The exhibition is supported by grants from the Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation, Washington, D.C., and the National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, D.C., a federal agency.

Roy Slade, *Director*

The work for which Lewis Baltz is best known has been published in book form with the title, *The New Industrial Parks near Irvine, California*, 1974. This series of photographs of buildings has become a definitive statement of a certain strain in contemporary photography—the formalist position, the straight photographer's ultimate De Stijl expression. Through this body of work and others, notably the 1973 *Tract Houses*, Baltz is generally recognized as occupying by himself an important place. He has been related to the "grids and serial patterns of the sixties" (Minimalism); to Precisionism; he has been called an "archetypical" modernist. But to consider him exclusively in such contexts is to miss the original, unsuperficial qualities to be found in the work viewed on its own terms.

A peculiar problem resulting from Baltz's approach is that the subject, treated as much for the artist's view to its abstract, planar qualities as with concern for its meaning or even its "nature," may carry no transcendent spirit. We automatically look for emotionally and morally evocative qualities in photography in a way we don't in painting or sculpture. The striking conclusion one comes to in considering the Maryland photographs, executed for the present exhibition, is that Baltz attains a penetrating psychological layer of content not by acceding to a more atmospheric look than before, but on the contrary by concerning himself more strictly than ever with factualness—and thereby virtually de-estheticizing the work. In many of the Industrial Park photographs one sensed a fleeting atmospheric flavor and an underlying "message" about the cheap edifices of our time. But even at their most poignant, the works remained finally obdurate. The emotionally stimulative attributes in Baltz's work are like the presence of ghosts. The photographs do not yield to romanticization; still they are increasingly establishing their authority as much more than formal exercises.

It is important to acknowledge the historical conventions behind these photographs, locatable not just in photography but in the painting of Mondrian and in Bauhaus design principles. Yet the presiding importance of the photographs may have little to do with this: they really are records of particular places in a particular time. In this Baltz recalls August Sander, though his compositional instincts are nearer to the Americans, Sheeler, Siskind and Evans. It cannot be escaped that in comparison to his precursors he projects a slightly cold mentality. The chill of the pictures is part of their gradually riveting fascination for us.

To enumerate the various departures from photographic convention that one can find in examining the work closely is beyond the scope of the present format. It is however irresistible to mention a particularly haunting feature of Baltz's photographs, noticeable especially in the present ones: light in these works appears not to equate with luminosity but merely to serve textural and compositional definition. In other words, light doesn't appear to us as establishing time of day or any mood at all; instead its ability to visually condition plain things—both "purely formal" and "purely factual"—is explored. Surfaces and compositional juxtapositions meet light halfway; the vector is elusive.

One didn't exactly think about it beforehand, but when it turned out some days after Baltz's arrival in Washington that he was photographing in suburban Maryland—in Wheaton, Silver Spring, Bethesda, Chevy Chase, Towson and College Park—it made perfect sense in light of his past photographs. The outlying residential areas are a side of "The Capital" that has a special character, and a character that is important in understanding the vastly more familiar central city. The truth about the suburbs bears little relation to the popular image of them as more or less uniformly affluent reaches of housing for the families

of the powerful. What Baltz has chosen to record are unintentionally eccentric lower-middle-class structures, recently built, and the accidental-seeming peripheral landscape patches surrounding them. The specific examples of architecture that Baltz photographs will be interesting to future historians from a sheerly documentary viewpoint. The industrial buildings and mass-produced suburban houses of the 1970s may actually be attributable to the very year by twenty-first century scholars based on "stylistic" (mostly economy-determined) features that we take for granted and barely notice. Moreover these buildings will doubtless need to be examined photographically, since the chances are slight of their enduring physically for more than a few decades.

The Maryland series represents a significant departure for the artist. Baltz has said that he attempted more scrupulously than ever to eliminate atmospheric overtones—"I hope that these photographs are sterile, that there's no emotional content"—and adds that he is "angered" by the photographs which he comes to feel do resonate emotionally. With the Maryland photographs, in contrast to the Tract Houses or the Industrial Parks, he deliberately tried to concern himself with, in his words, information clues: "I wanted to tell something about the place." Perhaps the most obvious schematic departure evident in these pictures is their asymmetry; rather than shooting straight on, frontally, and organizing the compositions around strict bilateral symmetric systems, Baltz has used various viewpoints. Something bordering on chaos begins to occur and yet an unexpected thing happens: new symmetries or schemes assert themselves, more sophisticated and complicated interrelationships of parts of each picture. The works are not disorderly; rather they are ordered with greater complexity than before. The most elementary example of the shift away from frontality is seen in *Maryland 8*, which is almost a parody on his own past work, taking precisely the kind of sub-

ject we've come to associate with Baltz and simply changing the angle from which it is shot. In *Maryland 12*, however, we see the full measure of his willingness to get inside his subject and to work with increasingly elaborate systems. This photograph has a special kind of symmetry along a vertical axis; it is as though architecture and landscape are exact counterparts and even equivalents. The Maryland photographs break not only from Baltz's own precedent but from certain accepted rules of photography. Finesse of detail is sacrificed for a steely, impenetrable effect. The skies, for instance, are bleached; and foreground detail, as in *Maryland 6*, is often obscured in featureless shadow. In fact subtleties of feature in general are all but disregarded as a means to establish internal richness; this is in distinct contrast to the earlier work.

These subtly licentious techniques work to the advantage of the photographs. The more one studies them, the more one recognizes a completely original sensibility. As Baltz year by year becomes more experienced, he gradually drains out of the photographs their schooled quality, their overtone of contrivance and calculation. From the beginning he has taken only two or three basic ideas and laboriously, continually refined them, reaching the point at which he can make startling departures. It is worth adding that in *Maryland 25* Baltz has made one nod to a sort of super-reductive image. It provides a glimpse into the artist's hidden side (he is so consistently disciplined and systematic)—for this work is quite undeniably a conscious joke.

Jane Livingston





























Catalogue of the Exhibition

Maryland 1 through *Maryland 25*, inclusive. Black and white silver gelatin photographs, 6" x 9" images on 8" x 10" paper.

Lewis Baltz

Born Newport Beach, California, 1945.
B.F.A. San Francisco Art Institute, 1969.
M.F.A. Claremont Graduate School, Claremont, California, 1971.
Taught Pomona College, Claremont, California, 1970-1972.
Taught California Institute of the Arts, Valencia, California, 1972.
Received an individual fellowship in photography from The National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, D.C., 1973, 1976.
Received John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship, 1976.
Lives Sausalito, California.

Individual Exhibitions

- 1970 Pomona College, Claremont, California.
- 1971 Castelli Graphics, New York City.
- 1972 International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, Rochester, New York.
- 1973 Castelli Graphics, New York City.
- 1974 "The Tract Houses," Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
Jefferson Place Gallery, Washington, D.C.
- 1975 University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, New Mexico.
Jack Glenn Gallery, Newport Beach, California.
Philadelphia College of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Catalogue (text by Janet Kardon).
Leo Castelli Gallery, New York City.
- 1976 Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, Maryland.
Seattle Museum of Art, Seattle, Washington.
La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, La Jolla, California.
Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas.
Lunn Gallery/Graphics International, Ltd., Washington, D.C.
Vision Gallery, Boston, Massachusetts.
Galerie December, Dusseldorf, Germany.

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1970 "California Photographers 1970," University of California, Davis; Oakland Museum, Oakland California; Pasadena Art Museum, Pasadena, California. Catalogue.
- 1971 "San Francisco Art Institute Centennial Exhibition," San Francisco Art Institute, San Francisco, California. Catalogue.
"Photomedia U.S.A.," California State University at San Diego. Catalogue.
"The Crowded Vacancy: Three Los Angeles Photographers," Memorial Union Art Gallery, University of California, Davis; Pasadena Art Museum, Pasadena, California; San Francisco Museum of Art, San Francisco, California; Friends of Photography, Carmel, California. Catalogue (text by Fred Parker).
"West of the Rockies," George Eastman House Symposium at The Oakland Museum, Oakland, California.

1972 "Man and His Environment, Photographs From the Permanent Collection," Pasadena Art Museum, Pasadena, California.

"Contemporary Photography," Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Nebraska. Catalogue.

"Portfolios and Series," The Oakland Museum, Oakland, California.

1973 "Two Documentary Photographers," College of Marin, Kentfield, California.

Castelli Graphics, New York City.

"Two American Photographers," Musee d'Art Moderne, Paris, France.

"Photography: Recent Acquisitions," Museum of Modern Art, New York City.

Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut.

"24 from L.A.," San Francisco Museum of Art, San Francisco, California. Catalogue.

1974 "Photography 1 — Recent Photographs by Seven Artists," Jack Glenn Gallery, Corona del Mar, California. Catalogue.

"Recent Acquisitions to the Collection of Photography 1972 & 1973," The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois.

"Art Now '74," John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Washington, D.C., Catalogue.

"Ten by Ten," Center for the Photographic Arts and Grossmont College, San Diego, California.

"Photography Unlimited," Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Catalogue.

1975 "Biennale de Paris," Musee d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris; Musee Nationale d'Art Moderne, Paris, France. Catalogue.

"Eight Los Angeles Photographers," Mills House, Garden Grove, California.

"Photography Redefined," Los Angeles Pierce College, Los Angeles, California.

"L.A.," Miami-Dade Community College, Coral Gables, Florida, California.

"14 American Photographers," Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, Maryland; Newport Harbor Art Museum, Newport Beach, California; La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, La Jolla, California;

Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota; Fort Worth Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas. Catalogue (text by Renato Danese).

"New Topographics," International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, Rochester, New York; Otis Art Institute, Los Angeles, California; University Art Museum, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey. Catalogue.

Columbia College, Chicago, Illinois.

"Silver Seventies," Art Museum, University of Oregon, Eugene.

"Photography," Douglas Drake Gallery, Kansas City, Kansas.

"Recent Acquisitions: Photography," Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Book by the Artist

The New Industrial Parks Near Irvine, California, Leo Castelli/Castelli Graphics, New York, 1974.

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